



International Arts and Imagination Network (IAIN) Launch 24 April 2025

Professor Penny Hay, Co-Chair IAIN, Bath Spa University UK

Imagination is our superpower

As our dear friend and hero Sir Ken Robinson said *"It is through imagination that we can create worlds in which we live. We can also re-create them."*

The launch of IAIN invites us to reflect on the power of the arts and imagination in learning and the future of education. We invite you to work with us together to build an International Network in Arts and Imagination:

- We will form a network of arts education advocates, drawing representatives from underrepresented regions to ensure a diverse perspective in driving international advocacy.
- We will collaborate with international partners to develop a framework for supporting arts and cultural education.
- We will draft a manifesto that clearly outlines the value of arts education in fostering empathy, cultural understanding, and essential human skills.
- We are committed to the concept of studio practice as a model for experiential learning, to promote experimental, immersive and iterative learning in the arts.

We invite you to join the conversation and help shape the future ...

Professor Noah Sobe, Chief Officer Higher Education, UNESCO

“Education in the arts can greatly expand a student’s capacity to master complex skills and can support social and emotional learning across the curriculum. It can enhance our human ability to access the experience of others, whether through empathy or the reading of non-verbal clues. The arts also serve to make visible certain truths that are sometimes obscured and can provide concrete ways to celebrate multiple perspectives and interpretations of the world. Artistic expression is often very subtle and grapples with life’s ambiguities. Arts in education enables students to learn that small differences can have large effects and when they are willing to surrender to the unknown; students can learn that everything changes with circumstance and opportunity.” *Building imagination, judgement and possibility through arts education*, UNESCO Reimagining All Our Futures 2021

When UNESCO’s Reimagining Our Futures Together report was released, many of us concerned with the vital role of imagination and creativity in education were immediately moved by the words outlined on page 73. It read like a quiet manifesto. Specifically, it highlighted:

Embedding artistic disciplines, including music, drama, dance, design, visual arts, literature, and poetry, across all levels of schooling as core components of the curriculum.

Supporting students’ social and emotional development by engaging them in art-making that fosters empathy, self-reflection, and emotional literacy.

Cultivating the capacity to navigate ambiguity and complexity through artistic experiences that encourage exploration, uncertainty, and multiple interpretations.

Providing new languages and methods of understanding that allow students to critically interpret the world, express personal and collective meaning, and engage in cultural and political dialogue.

Ensuring regular, sustained critical engagement with cultural heritage by connecting students to shared symbols, narratives, and practices that shape identities and communities.

At the launch of IAIN, Professor Noah Sobe offered a powerful overview of the key points made on that page. In three minutes, he reminded us that imagination isn't a luxury. It's a necessity. It's how we move beyond reactive systems and begin building regenerative ones. What stood out most was his framing of imagination as both a civic and educational imperative. Something we must nurture intentionally, not just through the arts, but in how we design schools, engage diverse voices, and make room for deep meaning-making.

Dr Rachael Jacobs, Western Sydney University

It's my pleasure to speak to this truly global gathering. I'm joining you from Gadigal land in the Eora nation which is the unceded sovereign name for the lands I am on in Sydney, Australia. Today we will hear about creativity, imagination and the arts and I acknowledge that rich arts practice has taken place on these lands for thousands of years. And when we speak about the social justice aims of the arts, we are reminded that there can be no justice until we have First Nations justice.

Today we gather to reaffirm our commitment to the critical urgency of the conversation about access to the arts as a human right, for every person, everywhere. We also know that some voices have been given more space than others in this conversation, so we remind ourselves of the importance of the arts for vulnerable, marginalised and minority communities.

This is why I advocate for IAIN to have a justice orientation. I'm guided by the principles of what I call *Creative Justice*. I draw on Noah Sobe's pertinent provocation for us: we all advocate for creativity, but what is creativity *for*? Creativity and the arts can be used in unjust ways, perpetuating the challenges faced by this world. It is not enough to teach creativity, activate imagination and engage in the arts. In this world that is "*sickened with*

the pollution of pollution, riddled with burgeoning racism, rife with growing huddles of the homeless” (Angelou, n.d.), we must make sure that art is a vehicle for fighting injustice, and an instrument for righting past wrongs and truth telling.

Creative justice encompasses climate justice, racial justice and all fights for justice that make sure that none of our fellow beings are left excluded, ignored or under attack. I am keen to see where the work of IAIN can be effective in decentring patriarchy, whiteness and capitalism, breaking the forces that perpetuate class division, and disrupting performative allyship. IAIN is also in an ideal position to advocate for adequate resourcing of artistic and imaginative endeavours, particularly for marginalised and minority groups.

Thank you for the work that you all do. It is through our collective power that we can make our futures stronger, brighter and more beautiful. Maya Angelou adds to previous quote, saying in these times “we need art and we need art in all forms. We need all methods of art to be present, everywhere present, and all the time present.”.

Thank you for being present with us today.

Professor Steve Seidel, Research Associate, Harvard Graduate School of Education

Greetings from the United States, where, as you know well, we are struggling with profound and deeply disturbing changes. I am grateful to be in conversation with all of you today, especially at this moment when constructive international dialogue feels so crucial. In recent years, especially as I watch our world suffer simultaneous and overlapping environmental, health, social, cultural, and political disasters, one after another, I have come to believe that perhaps the most important idea for us to teach is about interdependence, specifically the interdependence of human beings on each other and on nature. Recently, I came across this passage about interdependence in one of Carla Rinaldi’s essays. Sadly, Carla, one of the founders of the extraordinary preschools in Reggio Emilia, Italy, died just last week at the age of 78. In this essay, she argued that the central focus of education should be *“not humankind, but our relations with the world, our being in the world, our feeling of interdependence with what is other than ourselves.”*

So, I think it is a good exercise for our imaginations to wonder what school would be like if this idea of interdependence was the animating core of an entire curriculum. That is, what if we explored with children, year after year, their relationships with each other, “with the world,” and with, as Rinaldi wrote, “their feeling of interdependence with what is other than themselves.” This would include with people from different cultures, people with different ideas, values, identities, and beliefs, as well as, and perhaps most urgently with nature. What if this idea was a red thread that ran through every course and every lesson we taught across the disciplines and across a school?

Well, it is impossible to know until we try, but I believe that embracing this idea of interdependence as an animating core of our curricula might open a door for students to understand both the deep logic and the utter necessity of collaboration, collectivity, creativity, and community. It could well become the foundational understanding on which future generations will be prepared to address climate change, political polarization, and threats to democracy and freedom. It might enable them to save their lives and, indeed, to save the world.

Dr Debbie Yeboah, Postdoctoral Research Assistant, Forest of Imagination

When I first started teaching art in my classroom in Ghana, I observed that students had many ways of imagining themselves in their personal drawings. While some imagined themselves as royalty and cartoon heroes, for others, their ideal transformations required them to don straight slicked-back blond hair, and/or white skin, coloured in with peach crayons. I would see these depictions popping up in several figurative assignments across age groups. After considering it, in class I asked my students to name some famous artists they knew. The quick answer was the same that I have gotten in every classroom I've taught in, from primary to Master's level: Michelangelo, Monet, Picasso. When asked about African, indigenous or Ghanaian artists, they could not mention a single name. This pointed me back to the curriculum I was using. Both the national and international curricula used in Ghana and worldwide privilege western art and culture and the frameworks of knowledge these are built on. In my case, I was teaching a popular British curriculum. What that does is to determine what art knowledge worth knowing is, but also, who is valid as an artist, and as a subject, a person.

My research work doesn't just consider how to make new, diverse curricula. My work is to consider how through artmaking we can imagine new ways of being, which allow us to value a plurality of knowledge and cultures. It thinks about how we can imagine ways to put ourselves back together. Reconstitute the self, in community. Ways that don't fall into the traps of colonial forgetting and erasure. Ways to re-member, turning historical horrors to limitless possibility. What I propose is that critically engaging with contemporary African and diasporic art in particular, can be a way for us to find a new visual language that inspires this new form of art-making, one that challenges the deforming power of coloniality, and offers a way to reclaim agency. Contemporary because contemporary art is often a liberatory language of the now, and towards the future, drawing from the past as a necessary guide. For me, it is a key point that art teachers, particularly those who have themselves been put through schooling systems which inferiorize their very being, placing them in liminal spaces of the margins, understand their potential for creating radical pedagogical change in their classrooms and curricula. We can use art as a lens to critically engage the world, and centre artmaking it as reflective and imaginative life praxis.

Nia Richards, Director Creativity, Culture and Education (CCE)

At CCE, we want creativity to be part of every learning organisation and every system so every learner, teacher and leader can thrive. In the last 15 years or so we've reached over 2 million children and young people globally to support them to be-and-think creatively. And in this time, we've become more and more interested in creating the conditions for creativity, life-long learning and thriving in the classroom, in the school, and beyond.

So, the question we've set ourselves at CCE, and is equally relevant to the launch of this network; how do we get to a place of rooted and lasting transformation? Yes, one of the immediate answers may be policy change but there are people and organisations better placed than us to take up that cause. Where we think we can add the greatest value is through coalescing, agitating and supporting creative leaders throughout the system – the ones who can/or want to see, think and do differently.

Who and where are the leaders? Are the leaders the small group of us speaking today or is everyone on this call a leader? Your job title may not call you a leader, but something has drawn you to this event and I'm certain there's a wealth of leadership capabilities that can create change amongst us.

How can we become better connected and aligned. This is a real issue and this is why creating and supporting wonder-filled communities, like this one, is a key-priority for us.

How can our stories be amplified and become compelling? In a world of noise, how do we cut through. Visual storytelling?

How can we share and grow our collective knowledge, understanding and experience?

We've surely matured beyond just sharing good practice, how can we as leaders create new learning and new ways of learning together.

If we build creativity into the system and the system itself becomes creative, are we then in a position to move away from one and done arts/creativity programmes to embedded and sustained practice?

Sally Bacon, Co-Chair, Cultural Learning Alliance

One of the Cultural Learning Alliance's objectives is to make the case for why Expressive Arts subjects matter. Since the end of 2023, our Evidence and Value Narrative Working Group has been developing a new evidenced Capabilities Framework which sets out to do exactly that. The Group has five universities represented, including Bath Spa University, and has been advised by Professor Pat Thomson of Nottingham University.

We did not know at the outset that we were going to create a Capabilities Framework, but that's what has evolved through all our discussions and evidence analysis. The Framework sets out seven capabilities developed through Expressive Arts subjects. Each of these has personal benefits to the child or young person, but also broader societal benefits, and we see these two areas of benefit as completely connected, not separate.

We want the Framework to provide a helpful shared language for talking about the benefits of an Arts-rich education. In building that shared language we are reframing the value of

studying arts subjects. Anyone involved in arts education in the UK over the past decade and a half will know that we never managed to get our value narrative to land with previous governments which consistently talked about ‘strategically important subjects’ *excluding* the arts and ignoring their benefits on a personal and a societal level.

Within the Framework, the value of the experiences, skills and knowledge that children and young people acquire through Expressive Arts subjects are described within three distinct pillars that represent the kinds of capabilities that Expressive Arts subjects and experiences provide. These in turn encompass seven capabilities that have personal benefits for the child, which lead to connected societal benefits. These three pillars and seven capabilities are summarised in the short-form version of our Framework.

Our First pillar is BEING, BELONGING & BECOMING

- ❑ **The first capability here is Agency:** confidence, identity and autonomy → *enabling independent working and active citizenship*
- ❑ **The next capability is Wellbeing:** Flourishing, resilience and pleasure → *leading to mental health and emotional wellbeing benefits*

Our second pillar is RELATING

- ❑ **Here we have Communication:** self-expression, listening skills and relationship building → *which develop workplace skills, and support social cohesion*
- ❑ **Followed by Empathy:** compassion, understanding of difference and open-mindedness → *which support social bonding and civic engagement*
- ❑ **And also Collaboration:** co-operation, participation, connectedness → *which develop workplace skills and are invaluable for working effectively with others*

Our third and final pillar is CREATIVE & CRITICAL THINKING

- ❑ **Here we have Creativity:** imagination, curiosity and originality → *which enable innovation, and develop individuals as cultural makers and consumers*
- ❑ **And finally Interpretation:** which spans critical thinking, reflective judgement, meaning making → *and vitally supports the countering of disinformation*

All these capabilities and their benefits have been drawn from deep professional expertise and an examination of robust national and international evidence. The Framework can be

used in a variety of ways by schools and cultural organisations to support case making, programme development, school improvement, research and evaluation. The Framework isn't finished – we're still testing and fine-tuning it, but ultimately it will be an interactive online framework whereby you will be able to click on each capability to see the aggregated evidence key findings that sit behind each of the seven capabilities. It will be a powerful and evidenced shared language for describing the benefits of studying the arts.

Dr. Mike Bindon, Executive Director, ISTA (International Schools Theatre Association)

Reclaiming the Arts: A Call for Access, Advocacy, and Action

It was a privilege to speak at the launch of the International Arts and Imagination Network (IAN), and to stand among such esteemed voices calling for a global reimagining of education—one that places the arts and imagination at its heart. As Executive Director of ISTA, my life's work centres around creating meaningful opportunities for young people and educators to engage with the arts on an international stage. But today, I want to speak not only from my role, but from my belief that something vital is slipping quietly through our fingers.

Across the international schools we serve, I see the impact of policy decisions that are slowly but surely eroding the presence and value of the arts. There's a troubling decline in arts uptake, particularly at the pre-university level, and it's not simply because the arts aren't available. In many schools, they are offered. But uptake is blocked by a web of structural, cultural and social barriers.

In my previous role with the International Baccalaureate—an organisation that supports around one million students worldwide—I saw these patterns at scale. And in my doctoral research, I looked more closely at this “quiet decline”: the growing list of factors that dissuade young people from pursuing the arts, even when those subjects are part of the official curriculum. I spoke with schools around the world. The same themes arose time and again—timetable conflicts, lack of advocacy from leadership, pressure to choose STEM subjects, financial constraints, and deep-rooted misconceptions that the arts are somehow less academic or less valuable in terms of university admissions or career readiness.

These are not abstract problems. They are daily realities shaping the futures of young people who may never realise their creative potential—not because they weren’t gifted, but because they weren’t given the chance.

The truth is, breaking down these barriers is not about simply adding an art class here or there. It’s about reimagining school cultures from the inside out. It starts with leadership. When school leaders believe in the arts, when they advocate for them and understand their academic and emotional impact, everything begins to shift.

We also need to radically rethink how the arts are framed within education. We must speak with clarity, conviction and evidence about the value of creative subjects. Not just in terms of ‘soft skills’ or enrichment—but as essential, rigorous, transformative disciplines that shape identity, foster empathy, and build the capacity to lead, innovate and collaborate.

We must highlight and circulate the data that proves students in arts-rich environments do better—not just in their creative work, but across subjects. That creative learners are critical thinkers. That participation in the arts supports mental wellbeing. That universities, increasingly, are seeking out applicants with diverse portfolios that include creative exploration. These aren’t footnotes—they should be headlines.

At ISTA, we work with schools to build ensembles—not only among students, but among educators, leaders and communities. We believe in the power of the arts to create the interdependence that Professor Steve Seidel spoke about so eloquently: the deep, human need to collaborate, to be in relationship with others, to contribute something meaningful to the world. And we know that when young people make art together—when they perform, devise, reflect, take creative risks—they don’t just learn how to create. They learn how to connect.

It’s been said many times that the arts are not an extra. They are not an add-on. They are essential. But I would go further. I believe the arts are a vehicle for justice, for community, for cultural repair. And for young people today, they are a lifeline.

Let's stop treating creativity as optional. Let's refuse the idea that imagination is a luxury. Let's work together, across borders and sectors, to make arts-rich learning not the exception, but the norm.

Let us advocate—boldly, unapologetically—for a future in which all young people have access to the arts, and in which creativity is understood not only as a right, but as a responsibility.

It's been incredibly inspiring to have so many international voices come together and to turn up the volume on the message of the importance of arts, culture, and imagination in our education systems. The arts are all too often framed as enrichment, valuable, but optional, a nice to have, but not essential. The stakeholders here this evening, both in attendance and providing these provocations know this already and history has shown us time and again, that they are something far more essential. The arts feed and nurture our capacity to imagine, to empathise, to collaborate across difference, and to see the world not only as it is, but as it could be or should be. These are not peripheral, soft skills or 'value-added'. They are core competencies humanity needs now, perhaps more than ever.

Turning on our TV's, looking at social media or paying attention to the conversations in staff rooms of coffee shops, we hear and see stories of a world increasingly shaped by complex, interconnected crises: political polarisation, ecological breakdown, deepening inequality, and rapid technological change. These are not challenges that can or will be solved through more standardisation, more narrow metrics of achievement and a misguided adherence to league-tables and admission's expectations. They demand imagination, critical thinking, and the courage to tell stories that are different to the ones that no longer serve us. Despite our planet and our species finding itself in this reality, in far too many schools, young people are given fewer and fewer opportunities to develop these very capacities. At this moment we find ourselves, once again, at a moment in history where the need for a different kind of education is self-evident. And we are not the first to say this.

Generations of educators, philosophers, and artists have called for learning to be rooted in the development of our full humanity. The recent UNESCO report *Reimagining Our Futures Together* includes a repetition of that call on a global scale, and many of those joining us

tonight have long been advocates for an education system that places the arts and imagination at its heart.

But the question of *when* remains, when is the time for the arts to become essential to the *what* of our education systems? I've spoken about this before with colleagues and friends, including Professor Steve Seidel, and what we often return to is not just the importance of the arts, but the importance of timing. Because if not now, in the face of climate collapse, rising authoritarianism, mass displacement, and exponential technological advancement, then when? When we are on the cusp of brain-computer interfaces, gene editing, bio-augmentation, and AI systems that already outperform us in many domains, then when?

Are we really going to continue designing education systems that train young people to compete with technologies that already surpass us in speed, efficiency, and optimisation? The mechanistic models of education that have dominated since the industrial era grow not only outdated, but obsolete. We cannot, and should not, prepare students to outperform machines at being machines. Instead, we must ask: what does it mean to become more deeply, more fully human? The arts offer us that path. They don't simply teach us how to express what we know, they help us feel, question, reimagine, and connect. They help engender solidarity, collective hope, and moral imagination. That is why this network, our IAIN initiative, is not just an act of advocacy. It is a call to rehumanise education, and to shape a future that remains, at its core, both hopeful and human.

Alex Soulsby, Art Residency Thailand

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Dr Katherine Evans, University of Plymouth

Reflections

Reflecting on the powerful messages communicated by each speaker I was reminded of one key feeling - HOPE! It feels easy, at times, to give in to pessimistic views of the future, to become overwhelmed with the narratives of division, of despair and crisis. As a teacher I worry for an increasingly narrow and standardised education system, a system built on a narrative of traditionalism and conformity. As a mother I worry about the world my children are growing up in, a world in which empathy is weakness and individuality something to be feared and resisted. I worry for a planet that is suffering, for a world in which human beings have become so disconnected from the rhythms of the natural world. Listening to the words of the speakers however I was reminded of something - that these negative and pessimistic world views only win if we let them. I was reminded of the importance of collective voice and the power of a shared vision. Through creativity and the arts, we can not only imagine a different future, but we can bring it into being. We can create spaces for self-expression that unite, rather than divide. We can communicate ideas, experiences and feelings that are too complex for words but are brought to life through movement, through colour, through texture, through performance. The arts have power to visualise and open space for the unknown. It is through the arts and by taking seriously the power of imagination that we can create conditions for a better world, that we can embrace the positive potential of an unknown future and can provide the tools to bring imagined futures into being.

So, my reflections are on hope. Hope that my children's education can make space for imagination and creativity. Hope that the power of collective voice and influence can be harnessed in advocating for change. Hope for a future in which the arts are taken seriously as a tool to create a more inclusive and progressive world. I have hope!



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